

What Middle Class? The Shifting and Dynamic Nature of Class Position

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Abstract

Class categorisation should not only be informed by academic pursuits but by the lived experiences of those being categorised. A human or community centred definition of class will illustrate the complexities of class experience and will thus present a dynamic conceptualisation. Through two life histories interviews of two black women from South Africa this article illustrates that middle classness for blacks during apartheid was constantly shifting due to its socio-economic and political impermanence. Thus membership to this social position included continuous negotiation driven by inclusiveness in ones own community and the effects of being racially othered in interaction with whites and white spaces. In conclusion the article argues that being middle class and black is heterogeneously experienced and thus complex.

Key Words: Class, Black Middle Class, Life History

1. Introduction

Most recently South Africa (SA) has seen a growth in studies trying to understand and theorise on the black middle class. These have been varied in their approach and intentions. There have been those that are more populist in their approach and geared towards the retail industry and thus reductionist and problematic in their conclusions. These have reduced the experience of the black middle class to an undifferentiated mass of conspicuous consumers, foregrounding the tradition of conceptualising class and general life experiences of black people as homogenous and fixed. Other studies have been more theoretically grounded and

progressive in their contribution to knowledge production and societal illuminations of experiences of class, meanings of class and the complexities of the language used to denote individual social class positioning (Phadi & Ceruti, 2011; Phadi & Manda 2010; Krige 2011).

The growing interest in understanding the black middle class in post-apartheid SA is a result of the socio-economic and political changes that resulted from the end of apartheid and the enactment of legislations to address past inequalities like affirmative action, and Black Economic Empowerment. With these changes SA saw for the first time an exponential growth in the black middle class. Although this change has been recorded as positive by many it has nevertheless been accompanied by growing inequalities with South Africa's gini-coefficient, 'increasing from 0.64 in 1995 to 0.72 in 2005' (Bhorat 2009). These increasing levels of inequality have been more intra-racial and they illustrate a shift from the historical inter-racial inequalities known for apartheid SA (Seekings & Nattrass 2002; Leibbrant et.al 2010). This should not however be read to mean that racial inequality has been completely eroded (Keswell 2004; Gumede 2010; Leibbrant 2011), but that growing numbers of black people are in the middle class with a few more in the upper class (Leibbrant et.al 2011; Nattrass & Seekings 2002)

This article is based on life history interviews of two women who reluctantly self identify as middle class. Given the relatively high educational attainment¹ of both participants their understanding of class was an invocation of both theoretical understandings of the concept as alluded to in Phadi et.al (2011), and lived experiences of racial segregation, and renegotiation of social positioning. Thus their general conception of their social position as middle class was critically derived from their shifting experiences based on where they are and who was present (Lacy 2007). Being black in apartheid SA meant their being middle class came with constant complex negotiations of boundaries with community members that were not middle class and spaces that were middle class but white, thus raising racial dynamics not experienced at home. Therefore their experiences were marred by constant shifts and everyday negotiations. These complexities arise from the socio-economic and political impermanence of this social class position, resulting from a constantly shifting membership to this class.

This article provides a detailed discussion of how these two women experienced class and how the flux nature of the position provides significant pointers for a critical re-examining of

¹ One had completed a PhD in the social sciences and another was writing a PhD at the time of the interviews.

how the black middle class is lived and experienced from a subjective point of view. The next section provides the theoretical discussion of the concept class and middle class. Then the discussion that follows presents a brief explanation of the methodology, this is followed by a detailed discussion of the findings from the two life histories with women. Finally the article will present a brief conclusion that provides a summary of the arguments made in the article.

2. Class some theoretical discussions

Black middle class and the notion of conspicuous consumption erroneously suggest that blacks as members of this class consume for the sake of consumption. Conspicuous consumption has been defined as purchasing a product not for its utility but for displaying wealth and purchasing power, where the, 'price becomes the only factor of any significance to him or her' (Mason, 2007: 26). Krige (2012) reading of Soweto suggests that something else is at play here. He illustrates that on, 'a closer look at the longer histories of social mobility, social distinction and consumption provides us with a more complex and nuanced reading of the possible meanings of consumption' (Krige 2012). Therefore his analysis of consumption linked to house building and renovation in Soweto suggests that this was more a practice to signify their presence as residence of the city, in addition of their heterogeneity to their broader community. He accurately concludes that the one dimensional emphasis of the conspicuous element of consumption among the black middle class is a result of racialisation of the meaning of middle classness (Krige 2012).

In his further engagement with the concept of social class and mobility in Soweto, Krige critically engages with the works of Brandel-Syrier who writes about social class in Reeftown. Krige (2012) illustrates that Brandel-Syrier narrowly argues that, 'the term African middle class can have no meaning in terms of association and social interaction with the European middle class'. Krige takes Brandel-Syrier to task by critically illustrating that the flaws in her argument are homogenising and fixing the experiences or being of the people of Reeftown to their rural past and not to their varied and complex experiences of residing in Reeftown. Brandel Syriers refusal to see the Reef-town middle class as heterogeneous is problematic. In his engagement with the black middle class in America Lacy (2007) rightly maintains that to have a better and unbiased understanding of this group there is a need to make a distinction among the black middle class by looking at their income, wealth, housing, level of education and lifestyle. This will reduce unfounded generalisations and the potential

perpetuation of historically racial stereotypes, where an acknowledgement of differences among the black middle class will be acknowledged (Lacy, 2007: 3). This will also allow for an understanding of the complex ways in which the middle class manage their lives when they live among different classes of black and in middle class spaces that are racialised.

3. Methodology

This article is a result of a collaborative project on the black middle class. The broader project was titled: ‘Towards a more inclusive, cohesive and dynamic society: understanding the significance of the emerging black middle class’. In an attempt to make sense of the concept of the black middle class this particular part of the study employed the qualitative approach. The article moves from the assumption that the black middle class has been in existent in SA before 1994 (Mabandla, 2013), although in varied and shifting forms. This assumption is further attested to by the data gathered from the two life histories of women interviewed for this study.

To comprehend the unfolding histories (Hubbard, 2000) of the women I employed in- depth life history interview. The life history approach was useful in eliciting the patterns of the participants social relations and processes that shaped them (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984: 215). The data can thus be looked at from two perspectives; the lived life which presents the time line that the women shared as they narrated their factual life histories, these factual data is accompanied by the subjective accounts of their lives (Wengraft, 2005). These accounts are understood to be located in time and space, thus weaving the story tellers experiences to the broader socio-economic and political context (Hubbard, 2000). Given that the sampling of these participants was purposive the findings are not representative of any larger population group but are a subjective representation of the larger social, historical and economic process that impact the black middle class, this is made possible because, ‘life histories may focus on individual experiences, but that focus does not preclude an examination of social structure’ (Hurbbard, 2000: 4).

The point of departure for the interviews were to get a sense of how these women got to be where they are – middle class - by looking back. The aim was to get accurate descriptions of the womens life trajectories so as to uncover the patterns of social relations, meaning making and the varied processes that influenced them. Such an understanding provides a deeper explanation of the complexities involved in meaning making around their being middle class.

The interviews were conducted between Johannesburg and Pretoria respectively depending on the availability of the two participants. They were conducted between February 2012 and April 2012. Three interviews were conducted with each participant – each interview lasted for one hour to one hour thirty minutes. All the interviews were tape recorded and permission² to do so was sort and given prior to the interviews. The life history interviews provided Aganang and Mosa³ with an opportunity to share their stories. Who are these women, Aganang answered this question thus:

‘I am the fourth child, second daughter in a family of six children; I was born in a small village in the North West Province outside Rustenburg. When I say small village I really mean a small village, because everybody knew everybody else. Everyone knew everyone else – when a child was born everybody knew about it, when somebody died everyone knew about it. My father is a teacher, a retired teacher since 1987, my mother was a stay at home mom who started off working part time as a nurse or nursing assistant; part time as a teacher or teaching assistant and she did some domestic work as well and she worked as a shop assistant but when we were born my father decided that his wife is not going to work for anybody but stay home and take care of his children. Although my father was a teacher he also did some farming a little bit of cultivation and little bit of stock farming, so much so that when we went to school we all went to boarding school he would sell some of his life stock to pay our school fees’ (*Interview, March 2012*).

Mosa answered in the following ways:

Mosa: I would define myself I would define myself as born and breed in Johannesburg in the township all my life...mmm thats what I would say am a city kid...I was born at Bridge man but now its a private hospital and its in Mayfair area when you go via Brixton you know that. Garden City, do you know where Garden City is?

Grace: So it used to be a public hospital? And when was that?

Mosa: 1958! So am not sure if it is because my parents were both black say middle class or what? They were public servants my father was trained as a teacher but never worked as a teacher I think he worked for half a year or a year he worked for the city council of Johannesburg these places where we use to pay rent he was the seniors municipal officer and my mother was a nurse at a clinic in Soweto, they both worked in the township, my mother walked to work in Mofolo South clinic my father could walk, but he used to drive to work, he had a car. He worked at Number 1 office in white city it is a walking distance. (*Interview, February 2012*).

Already in Mosas response to who she is there is already a tension seen in her hesitance to define her parents as middle class my parents were both say middle class or what?. This not

² The participants signed a consent form indicating their formal agreement to participant in the study and another one to formalize their agreement to the use of the tape recorder for the interviews.

³ To protect the anonymity of the participants pseudonyms are used.

fully identifying as middle class is a constant theme throughout the life histories of both women. The rest of the interviews focused on the following themes:

- The beginning (where they grew up, their parents, siblings),
- Their neighbourhoods,
- The socio-economic position of their family in relation to the broader community,
- School years (primary, secondary and university),
- Work experiences,

On further exploration of these general themes opportunities emerged for probing that provided insight into the particular experiences of class at particular life stages. The interviews were illuminating in ways I did not anticipate, they revealed an interesting history of being black and middle class in apartheid SA.

4. Discussion of the two life histories

Most research undertaken on the black middle class is either quantitative or general in that it does not use the life history approach to understand the phenomenon from the point of view of women. The only work that interrogates womens experiences and negotiations of class positions is the 2009 documentary emanating from the Classifying Soweto Study by Mosa Phadi and her follow up 2011 article.

Both Mosa and Aganang came from middle class families. Although their self- identification as middle class was critically defined for Aganang because of its impermanence it was a defining factor in how she experienced her early life. The same is true for Mosa – she suggested that even though being middle class did not openly define how she interacted with communities, the social positioning of her parents facilitated how her life experiences panned out.

4.1 Am I middle class? A critical engagement with the conception of one as middle class

Research on class usually takes it for granted that the academic understand of the concept is similar to that held by the broader society. Again the characteristics used to denote membership into a particular class are also usually assumed to be uncomplicated, and unquestioningly accepted by those who are theorised about. Recent studies into the middle class have however began to illustrate the intricacies involved in self identifying as middle

class, the language used to refer to class and other factors that impact on belonging to and being able to identify with that class (Phadi et.al 2009; Phadi et.al 2011; Krige 2011). These complexities were clearly visible in how Aganang responded to my request for her to participate in the study. Her response revealed a deep questioning of the usual blind characterisation of particular people as belonging to this class because they share similar features with other members of the class.

When she wrote back questioning whether she was middle class, and how I came to that conclusion I initially thought she was not interested in participating, however on close attention it became clear that this questioning was embedded in her history and the history of the social, economic and political context of her upbringing. Below is our email communication requesting her to participate in the study:

Grace: Dumela, I have been meaning to ask you this for a few weeks now – I am involved in a study on the black middle class – I need to ask you to participate as an interviewee in the study.

Aganang: I think we need to talk more before I say yea or nay. I am not sure that I understand the debates Am I middle class? What constitutes middle class?.

Aganang: I think maybe the meta-narrative in current class discourse and that is to treat black middle class as a post 94 phenomenon and therefore understandably they tend to link it to access to financially expensive spaces such as some former white suburbs including the gated communities of recent years, universities and schools including even the latest ridiculously expensive private schools exclusive motor car dealers etc. I would like to hear what the thinking is behind the apparently racialised middle class. Do we belong to a different middle class from other racial groups? If the class division is highly determined by finances, where does social/way of life fit into all this? I believe one needs to understand the culture of money rather than just to have money may be Im wrong but I think old monies have a related culture. Before 1994 where would professionals who were traveling internationally fit think of bo DDT Jabavu, Dr Xuma Mr Pixley ka Seme and many other educated Africans from this time and earlier (I am not suggesting that these examples come from the same era). What drives the classification of people as middle class? Is it resources, way of life, occupation? What about all the other kinds of wealth that is not classifiable in the western sense like bonds in the bank, lots of money that is traceable on article. Simply put where the western and non Western approach meets here. Do I make sense? (*Email communication, February*).

Aganangs response above raise questions about the assumptions we make as academics when we classify those we study. A similar discussion in Phadi et.al (2011) is used to illustrate the significance of theorizing from below and the importance of the historical development of concepts - signifying their specific contexts. To illustrate the importance of theorizing from

below Phadi et.al (2011: 84) contends that, the segregation between academic-conceptual meanings of class from its popular usage-based meanings is not viable in the case of class, because social experiences and the self conscious articulation of this experience form an important and indispensable aspect of the theoretical concept of class. This is because the concept of class ‘demands the inclusion of popular conceptions’.

At the heart of Aganangs contention to her identification as middle class was her surprise at the public discourse that linked the black middle class to conspicuous consumption and the limitation of the Black Diamonds label. Her critique of the term was equally questioned in 2005 when it was first put into circulation⁴. This label was not acceptable for her as it seemed to homogenous and suggests that the emergence of a black middle class was a wholly post-apartheid phenomenon, this is similarly argued by Mabandla (2013). Aganangs reference to the Semes and Motsepes and to the question of whether for our understanding of social position does it count which social position your parents occupies is important in indicating the historically racialised way class is define in SA. Again this historicisation is important in how she tells the story of who she is, and how she identifies or not identify as middle class. Aganangs response also illustrates her sharp reading of the flaws in contemporary public discourse on the black middle class and its unspoken assumptions that the history of the black middle class is non-existent, insignificant and not to be engaged with. Her contention demands that we broaden our view of black society and thus the different ways of being that racialised access meant for the black middle class.

Given the racialised nature of apartheid SA class was experienced as an uncomfortable and shifting identifier because of its impermanence and convoluted nature in SA, thus leading to a cautious identification with it as a categorisation, The flux of the concept came up in two particularly revealing ways in the two life histories, this impermanence and complexity of class position like in Phadi et.als (2011) study of class in Soweto was identified in comparison with others and to their past. In his theorising on boundaries and class among the black middle class in America, Lacy (2007) found something similar to what Phadi refers to above. He found that middle class blacks had to not only negotiate their racial identity but they had to manage how they interacted with members of lower classes in their own community, these interactions ‘shape middle class blacks conceptions of who they are’ (Lacy 2007:9). The following subsection captures the two discussions that illustrate how these two

⁴ See Krige 2011 for a detailed and illuminating examination of the various debates on the issue.

womens conception of who they are was influenced by the individuals, spaces and principles they came into contact with in their everyday lives.

4.2 Managing Difference: negotiating inclusion in own community and the middle class position:

Although it was confusing for Aganang when she was young to comprehend why her parents insisted that she was not any different from the other children, when she could clearly see that they were different. Although at the time of the confusion she did not link the differences to class it became apparent as she grew older that her fathers education and wealth had a lot to do with the difference she felt when growing up. She said:

‘the village where I grew up there was this thing were children grew up with their grandparents or sometimes they grew up without parents because their parents were in Johannesburg working but with us we had both parents and that forever had a sense of difference even though my parents especially my father used to hammer the fact that you are no different from these other children but it was funny because whilst he was saying we are no different you see difference every day you go home there is your mom you go home there is your dad the other kids dont have mom and dad they have but they are in Johannesburg working so how can we not be different and you go home there is a car the other parents dont have cars and father says you are not different you go home come month end your father and mother possibly you too get into this car you go to town buy groceries you do all these things that the other kids dont do but your father says you are not different, I think what he was instilling in us was humility - be humble dont think you are better off materially you are better off - dont think you are better off in any other way and thats the first lesson I think we learnt from our parents that of humility...’ (*Interview, March 2012*).

The emphasis by Aganangs father to be humble was an interesting way of negotiating their middle class position in a community that was not middle class. This parental negotiation of class difference by instilling a certain kind of behaviour was similarly experienced by Mosa. Although like Aganang she was not very conscious of the differences she remembers a moment when this reality of her being different happened during her school presentation. She said:

‘*Mosa*: I remember once there is a story in the class room at standard 2 the teacher asked us to say to talk about something that we did at home and I said in my bedroom I dont know but I was saying something that I did in my bedroom and the whole class was wow you have your own bedroom it was strange that nobody had their own bedroom and I was like I thought this was what happens in other families and I was the only child with my mother and dad....things that happen that made me different and never or could have made me different but it never did I was just one of those kids at school. (*Interview, February 2012*).

Again with Mosas example it is clear a difference was experienced but for her the negotiation of everyday life had to do with other things. Even though the difference was somewhat downplayed even when it was clearly visible in everyday experiences and observation of others around them – it influenced who they became. Again this difference was observed in the food they had access to as compared to the other children in the village According to Phadi et.al (2011) community wide comparisons are significant in how class is defined and how one positions themselves in relation to others. This is apparent in how Aganang understood the social position of her family when she was young. Although the food they had access to was supposedly more nutritious it was different. Below Aganang shares a memory where she and her siblings questioned why their mother did not work in the kitchens so that they could also eat dikokola⁵, she said the following to illustrating this point:

‘Aganang: ...food when I grew up we use to have this dikokola dried bread parents who worked as domestic workers used to take bread I dont know no am going to guess because I wasnt exposed to that on first hand basis apparently when you are working and there is bread thats left over from the table you had free access to it so what they did they would put butter and jam red jam I dont know if it was red jam they dried it up until the time that they wanted to send it home they use to be kombis or trucks that would take parcels boxes of parcels back home so the mother or the father would send that big box which would have probably clothing which will have food so we had this dried bread which was called dikokola and remember in our village we didnt have a shop, shops were a few kilometers away so we did not have the luxury of having fresh bread so what I remember was that because my mother was not working as a domestic worker my father was not working as a domestic worker we were envious we wanted dried cramps we wanted cramps we wished we could have a...

Grace: You wanted dikokola?

Aganang: Yes we wished we could have a box arriving at our door step with dikokola because when my parents went to town they came with fresh bread and then my mother used to bake bread I dont know if you know the traditional bread that we baked so she would have used bread and what is it called the bread mill and then metho and then cook she would make dumplings all those things all of them are fresh you dont want that... (Interview, March 2012).

These two women we taught to not openly identify with the class position of their family, this was primarily a result of apartheid engineering. Blacks were restricted to townships and homelands whether they could afford to live elsewhere they were forced to reside with their own race even though they might have been different with regards to social class. The ‘Apartheid Group Areas Act forced the black middle class to live alongside workers’ (Phadi

⁵ Old bread left over by the madams family for the domestic worker to take home month end. This bread would be oven toasted and come month end the women who worked in the kitchens would send it home to their children. Other families dried the bread in their own families as preservation – to avoid waste.

et.al, 2011: 93). This is another reason why class was underplayed in black communities during those years and an inclusion that emphasized racial belonging was emphasized instead. This meant their experiences were unlike those of the black middle class in America who Lacy (2007) suggests engaged in exclusionary boundary work – to illustrate they were different to poor blacks. In the case of Mosa and Aganang they were barred by racial laws that controlled their movement and integration to any other group – thus they engaged in a more integrationists negotiation of their class position with that of the various positions of members of their communities. This underplaying of differences of class and gender were undertaken to focus energies on racial oppression (Ramphela, 2000; Krige 2012). Therefore the experiences presented by Mosa and Aganang suggest that these supposedly homogenous communities were very different and complex in how they experienced class position. Mayers (1977) quoted in Phadi et.al (2011: 86), ‘illustrates that class stratification manifests in an oppressed environment’. This stratification remains true whether it is acknowledged as present or not.

4.3 Managing Difference: negotiating racial exclusion, being the other middle class:

The positions of these two women also illustrates the broader racialisation of relations and social position of the time, they could not openly be middle class in their communities of origin. This was also true when they were in historically white spaces. Even though with regards to class positioning they were similar to most whites they still could not self-identify with the middle class position as occupied and lived by whites in similar ways. The privileging of white middle classes during apartheid meant for both Mosa and Aganang that in comparison the privilege and access they experienced in relation to their communities of origin was disadvantaged in comparison to the experiences of the white middle class, thus they were more similar to the black working classes than they could be to the white middle class. This meant they could not even begin to think of what Lacy (2007) refers to as, inclusionary boundary work – which means that in America the, ‘middle class blacks engage in inclusionary-work to establish social unity – to show that middle class blacks are much like the white middle class’ (Lacy 2007: 76).

This difference is illustrated when Aganang and Mosa went to study at Wits. For Mosa this happened at the height of the students revolts of the 1970s which denotes an era where racial difference was signified as compared to deracialised class unity. Again the difference they

experienced when they came to Wits attested yet again to the impermanence and complex class position they were meant to occupy. For Aganang who had undertaken her undergraduate degree at the then University of Turfloop⁶ – coming up to Wits for a post graduate degree opened her eyes to yet another shift in her ability to identify herself as middle class, she was not the same middle class as the white middle class. She shares her experiences thus:

‘Aganang: Im applying Im going and I wanted to come and do my honours at Wits and I was advised that my third year, my basic degree, my third year from the University of the North is an equivalent of second year here, so I was rejected for my honours...’.

*‘Aganang: ...not that I had a problem with English because when you were at the University of Limpopo - SOVENGA stand for Sotho, Tsonga, Venda, Sotho for Bapedi, Batswana, Southern Sotho, VE for the Venda, NGA for the Tsonga, so you walk in, on campus that day, you say to a person Dumela (*greeting in Sotho and Tswana*) maybe he is Tsonga and that meant apartheid made sure that if he is not from Soweto hes never heard a Sotho person speak before so we had to speak English, we necessarily had to speak English because we had friends across all these, but then also we had foreign nationals we had Namibians, we had Malawians, we had you know, so you first speak English before you establish that the person is Sotho, Mopedi, Sotho, South Sotho or from Soweto and therefore you speak that, but then I dont want to called it a culture shock but maybe it was, when you walk into campus and you see, see these white faces in an apartheid country and also in the faculty thats the Architecture faculty ...I think there were four, I dont think there were five Africans in all the...*

Grace: students?

Aganang: yes African students in the faculty...

Grace: staff?

Aganang: staff, staff would be messengers, would be cleaners, would be...

Grace: the black?

Aganang: yah, there was only one guy who was a photographer in the architecture, so we were quite few, we were quite few and at the time I dont think most people knew that you could just apply and go to Wits because the extension of bantu education act of 1959 made sure that you can only go to a white university if you are doing a course that is not offered in the black university or if you cant go to a black university for health reasons...

Grace: extension of Bantu Education Act of

⁶ It is now known as the University of the North, Limpopo Campus.

Aganang: 1959, I mean the Bantu Education Act was passed in 1953, now the extension of Bantu education Act meant that Bantu Education Act is extended to universities where I think people like Dr Motlana and his contemporaries studied at Wits but then that privilege or right was taken and therefore we couldn't just come now I don't know if you know the story about my applying to come to Wits. We needed a ministerial permit, I still have it somewhere I could give you a copy if I can find it, now the fascinating thing about the ministerial permit was I'm in Rustenburg but I need to go to the South African embassy in Mafikeng to go and get a permit to allow me as a person from an independent country to (laughs) to study, well it's funny no, actually there was a confusion, there was a policy confusion because if you are from an independent country we had honorary access. For example the three women who were lecturing at the University of Bophuthatswana came here on that ticket, so they were, they were guests, they were guests of the South African Government...

Grace: so Bophuthatswana was really thought of as another country?

Aganang: of course, (Grace laughs) we were in another country so these people came from the university, came to Witd, they lived in one of the residences, they were allowed privileges that your regular black Soweto person wouldn't be allowed because look this is a white country, so they got that honorary the same thing that was extended to other people from Botswana, Malawi or all that who could come here, but I was treated like your regular black because I needed a ministerial consent and a ministerial consent would have to state that the course that I want to do is not on offer in our universities so I had to travel from Rustenburg to the South African embassy in Mafikeng, to get a consent, a ministerial consent and that says I'm authorized to go and study at Wits university, at a white university and when I got to Wits I saw those women and I wondered why was I discriminated against no because they are the same as me but you know I got the, that thing but then came accommodation as well, they lived at Res at Wits but I lived at Glen Thomas in Baragwanath with your regular South African Bantus, so we used to come by bus to campus and got back like that, so I remember at some point when they were debates about having black students in residences, I remember the rector Professor Du Plessis said something like I think there was resistance from white students, and he said if you could rub shoulders with them in your lecture halls I don't see why you can't rub shoulders with them in your whether it is in your showers, in your bathroom or, that's something like if you can sit next to them in class why can't you sit with them in dining halls like that and remember in the 70s

Grace: and how did you find it in terms of your ability to cope with the teaching?

Aganang: look the teaching them, the challenge was not only about the shock, the shock of being in a white, white, white liberal white institution, but it was moving from one discipline to the next as I said.....'...'(Interview, April 2012).

Her experiences illustrated the limits of class position when you are not permitted to be in similar ways as others occupying the same social position; in Aganang's case this was in reference to the white middle class. Phadi et.al (2011: 102) indicates that, middle class

identity reflects ‘the material reach that social location confers, but also the width of the social view that different social locations permit’ (Phadi et.al, 2011: 102).

Mosas experiences illuminated the disparities between the races much earlier than it did for Aganang. She did her first degree at Wits, although her encounter with this University earlier illuminated her differences to the white middle class, it meant she was somewhat better able to deal with these differences when she became a student of the University. She said:

Mosa: I applied at wits I was send the forms and forms included that you must also apply for ministerial consent, permission from the minister of Education and training or City Bantu education - you couldnt come to Wits because of group areas act and because its a white university you had to get the permission from the minister so I put in this application and I sent it to Pretoria and in the front they asked why I wanted to come to this university because this degree is not offered in any black universities that was my reason and the minister would consider it. You were never certain that you will get it or not and then I mean wits was 99% white there was no black person I think maybe the top people were there I dont know I didnt know anybody then I knew because Mathabathe had told us he had empowered us about Wits that you dont have to go to a bush university why do you want to go to a bush university when there is a university in Johannesburg he had said he would say this is our city you can get education.

Mosa: I didnt even know Wits I mean I was from a boarding in Philip City in QwaQwa I mean I never knew about this its only in 1976 when we were at Wits in 1977 to see that here is really a university I dont know in one of the meetings I dont know but I remember Mathabathe I will never forget his statement saying why should you go far when there universities nearer so I applied and the minister actually in my application one of the things that they wanted at wits was a testimonial I remember one of the testimonial that I need was to get from my then father in the Anglican church and he give me hassles he said what you want me to write you a testimonial for wits that is a white university they will never accept you and I struggled I would go to his office everyday he wouldnt be there he wouldnt do my letter and I remember I dont know one thing that he said I dont remember how he said but he gave me the indication that you not that class that goes to wits like there people who are from the rich or whatever the well-known people can get there the Mothlana s because I remember in our church we were in the same church with Dr Mothlana s family ...
(*Interview, February 2012*).

Mosas encounter with Mathabatha, one of the individuals active in sensitizing black youth during the 1970s in Soweto meant that her application to Wits was a radical questioning of exclusion, but not necessarily that of inclusionary work as referred to by Lacy. The work of challenging exclusion engaged in by the youth of 1976 was based on the idea of a unification of blacks as espoused in the black power movement. The various experiences linked to public encounters with whites, brought about a reevaluation of membership to the middle class, and

somewhat suggested that the idea of difference experienced earlier was not necessarily true or necessary

Conclusion

Through a detailed discussion of two life histories this article has illustrated that the social position of class and middle class in particular for the two black women was not experienced homogeneously throughout their lives. The apartheid racial politics, ideas about who you should be among your community and the negative public discourse on the black middle class as conspicuous consumer all impacts how they experienced and identified with the label. Like it was shown in Phadi et.al (2011) context shapes meanings of class and I would add experiences associated with a particular class position. These findings are significant for our general thinking of class position and the experiences of the black middle class during apartheid and in post apartheid South Africa.

The article discussed three significant themes that came up in the life histories with the two women. These ranged from how their history was influenced by the class and racial identity of their parents, which consequently influenced how they dealt with and conceived of themselves as belonging to a racialised and shifting class position. This was taken further by negotiations of difference when dealing with own communities and difference when in racialised public spaces. A discussion of these themes illustrates the complexity of being middle class and black in both apartheid and contemporary SA. Therefore we need to take into consideration that being middle class and black is heterogeneously experienced and thus should be understood as such.

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